

# CHING LING FOO: THE SECOND-GREATEST MAGICIAN OF ALL TIME

## 金陵福：史上第二偉大的魔 術師

*\*The Prestige meets Sherlock Holmes*

*\*Based on an incredible true story*

*In this novel, Chang Kuo-Li vividly recreates the world of stage magicians, revolutionists, journalists, boxers, and prop makers of a century past.*

The time is 1904. Revolution is brewing in China, as the Qing empire struggles for its last breath. Meanwhile, in London, two illusionists fight to be known as the original Chinese Conjuror: Ching Ling Foo, who has achieved great fame in the US with his signature “water bowl” trick, and Chung Ling Soo, who is in fact a white American named William Robinson. Years before, he tried to expose Foo’s trick but was publicly rebuked. Now, as Chung Ling Soo, he has copied almost all of Foo’s tricks and vows to dominate the London vaudeville. Soo accuses Foo of having ties to the Boxer rebels, while Foo demands that Soo prove he is Chinese. Their feud turns increasingly violent, leading up to a final showdown that robs Soo of his life and leaves only mystery behind.

In this novel, Chang Kuo-Li vividly recreates the world of stage magicians, revolutionists, journalists, freedom fighters, and prop makers from a distant era. His dual narrative depicts a legendary face-off between magicians while exploring China’s turbulent modern history, and quietly telling the story of an enigmatic woman known as Green, who just might be the greatest Chinese magician of them all.

Chang Kuo-Li 張國立



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booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

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Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of *China Times Weekly*, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published a dozen books over his career, including *Italy in One Bite*, *Birdwatchers*, and *The Jobless Detective*.

# CHING LING FOO: THE SECOND- GREATEST MAGICIAN OF ALL TIME

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

*I'll eat the way they do  
With a pair of wooden sticks  
And I'll have Ching Ling Foo  
Doing all his magic tricks*

*I'll get my mail  
From a pale pig-tail  
For I mean to sail  
From here to Shanghai*

—Irving Berlin (1888-1989) “From Here to Shanghai”

## **The Chinese Ring Trick**

The Empire Theater was full even before the curtain went up. Everyone was curious about the Chinese man who'd just arrived in London. A poster by the entrance proclaimed: Ching Ling Foo, the one and only Great Chinese Magician.

It was the end of 1904, and London was shrouded in coal smoke. The thirteen-thousand-ton armored warship HMS Goliath puffed black clouds as it slowly made its way through the muddy water at the mouth of the Thames, heading to Asia on what might be its final voyage. Its creaky twelve-inch gun turrets swiveled from time to time, as if stretching their faintly rust-streaked torsos.

In front of the theater, a row of peddlers offered cigarettes, newspapers, shoe shines, and coffee, while an agitated crowd stood in line waiting to buy tickets for the evening's performance. Next to them, a man in a top hat had one foot on a shoeshine boy's thigh, as he chatted with another gentleman who was grooming his whiskers with a tortoiseshell comb. They ordered a cup of coffee each as they waited. To the men of London, coffee was every bit as vital as the weekly paper's entertainment news. The urchin with the soot-covered face, who couldn't have been older than ten, fanned the coal brazier hard until the coffee pot began to bubble. The men were talking about the most recent news: Ching Ling Foo, the Empress of China's personal magician. A few years ago, she'd sent him to give a performance in America, which had caused quite a sensation. The Americans hadn't seen many of his tricks before, and

found them excitingly fresh. Apparently, he could even cause a tank of water to appear out of mid-air.

“A flying vat of water,” said Beard Comber, waving the newspaper in an exaggerated gesture.

“Eighty-five pounds. Have you ever lifted anything that heavy? Let me tell you, your back wouldn’t be able to take it,” replied Top Hat.

There was nothing spectacular about producing an empty tank, but one filled with water and weighing eighty-five pounds? There was no way to get something like that past an audience.

“The American papers believe he had an iron chain around his waist, and the tank was suspended between his legs, covered by that Chinese robe of his. At the right moment, he released the chain, took a step back, and there was the tank.”

“Carrying eighty-five pounds between his legs? Would he still be able to walk?”

“True, you can’t trust the American papers.”

The bearded man put away his comb.

“I only hope this conjurer isn’t one of those opium fiends.”

Top Hat chimed in right away, “Perhaps as he reclines on his Chinese couch, we’ll see Aladdin’s genie emerge from his opium pipe!”

The men chuckled in two different keys, but never mind, they’d soon receive the proof they wanted. They finished their coffee and entered the theater just as the curtain was slowly rising.

First to take the stage was Moser, Ching Ling Foo’s American manager. With one hand on his tie and the other behind his back, he coughed a few times to silence the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the great Chinese magician Ching Ling Foo will give his first public performance in London today. Before that, I would like to...” He was still speaking when a large man at center stage began banging on a kettle drum. Immediately, two trios of Chinese warriors jumped onto the stage from either side, brandishing rattan shields and red-tasselled machetes. They hunched behind their shields like they were part of their bodies, and leapt forward towards each other, their gleaming blades clashing together resoundingly.

Before the audience could make out what they were doing, the six Chinese fighters were engaging in fierce combat, while Moser cowered amidst them.

No one noticed Moser’s awkward contortions, as the six swords and shields were taking up all their attention. After several rounds of fighting, they roared and took flying leaps, brushed past each other in mid-air, and in an instant had retreated to the edges of the stage, where they stood in neat lines.

Laughter mingled with the rising applause as the audience noticed Moser again. His suit had been slashed so badly, it was now no more than shreds of fabric clinging to his undergarments.

Yet the laughter vanished as quickly as it had risen, as every mouth now gaped. Four girls in costumes of the imperial Chinese court were sashaying onto the stage in enormous embroidered hats and the champagne heels of legend, their undulating hands scattering colorful flower petals from bamboo baskets.

“This is the daughter of Ching Ling Foo, Princess Chee Toy,” Moser called out. “She is dressed in the fashion of the Chinese aristocracy, for as you all know, Mr. Ching Ling Foo has performed before the Empress of China. Her Majesty adopted his daughter, bestowing upon her the title of princess.”

Chee Toy came last, deliberately swaying her body, her enormous black hat bedecked with flowers quivering so violently it made one fear for her delicate, pale neck.

“You may have noticed that what the princess has on her head is no ordinary hat, but a traditional Manchurian hairpiece; on her feet are not champagne heels, but flowerpot soles. No one would dare to dress like this unless they were a member of the Manchu aristocracy or imperial court, or else the Empress had conferred the honor on them.”

No one in the audience, male or female, could take their eyes off the slender Chinese princess as she promenaded amongst the scattered petals.

Theater audiences in London are known for their belligerence. A man shouted, “Bound feet! We want to see Chinese bound feet.”

Apparently, quite a few people were interested in this, and soon many men were chanting along, “Bound feet! Bound feet!”

Moser froze, but in the blink of an eye, the three court ladies had suddenly retreated to the back of the stage, leaving Chee Toy to turn and face the audience. She bent in a low bow, yet just as she straightened up, her whole body vaulted into the air, and she kicked several times, finally coming to rest on her flowerpot heels like nests of noodles.

“Chee Toy is a princess. Manchu women don’t have bound feet...”

Moser’s words were cut off by shrieks of alarm. The princess was on the floor, balancing her entire weight on her back as her elegant body curled into a ball, the enormous headpiece wobbling and threatening to fall.

Amidst the screams, one of the swordsmen threw his machete at the princess, only to have her unhurriedly kick it into the air with her left foot. When a second man drew his sword, her right foot answered.

Two swords lay defeated, both dispatched with a kick to the handle. When a third and fourth came at her simultaneously, two even faster kicks sent them spinning away from her. The slightest mistake, and those blades would have missed her feet and plunged straight into her body.

The fearless princess didn’t give the swords a chance. Yet the fifth and sixth did not allow her any time to relax: she rolled even faster than before, unerringly kicking every attacking blade out of the air.

The back row stood up. Were they waiting for the princess to get hit? Or to see how she would fend off the danger of six swords at once?

The princess kicked the first sword back into the hands of the first swordsman, then the second, and the third. By the time Chee Toy had dealt with the sixth sword, she’d spun around several times, her body arched like a bow.

The cheering that filled the hall made it clear that Princess Chee Toy had thoroughly conquered her British audience.

Though China's warships had been defeated by the Japanese just a few years before, and caricatures of the Chinese smoking opium on their couches appeared regularly in every English paper, these Londoners were enraptured with this delicate princess. As the American newspapers put it, "Every American man who has seen Ching Ling Foo perform is sure to emerge besotted with his daughter."

Chee Toy was breathing hard and tapping her chest as she took her bow. Gazing at her flushed, smiling face, who could help loving the princess?

This was the headline that would appear in one of the papers the following day: "Who could help loving the Chinese princess?"

Londoners weren't sure precisely how many princesses there were in Beijing's imperial palace, but at this moment, there were at least two of them in their city.

No sooner had the princess left the stage when a tall, thin Chinese man with a pigtail, and wearing a long robe and a mandarin hat appeared in her place. He clasped his hands and bowed to the audience, then rolled his sleeves to the shoulder. In a flash, his emaciated arms had moved behind him and reappeared with a silver hoop in each hand. These were bigger than the sort typically used by conjurers, about the size of train wheels. How could he have hidden such large objects behind his back?

He lifted them, tapped them against one another, then tossed them consecutively into the air. He repeated this movement several times, then suddenly sped up, and began passing the ring in his hand with the one in the air.

He separated them and tossed them individually upward, but the next instant, they were joined together in mid-air.

Many had seen the Chinese ring trick before, but never with one of the rings spinning in mid-air as it intersected with the other.

Before the audience could clap, the hoops were back in the performer's hands. He sent both spinning through the air, so each landed neatly around the neck of a swordsman on either side of the stage. When they raised their blades to cut through the rings, he drew them back as if by magnetic force. They clashed together resonantly, gradually deepening in pitch. He threw them again into the air, then just as they were about to hit the ground, his talon-like fingers shot out and, easily as shuffling cards, rubbed them against each other. Suddenly, one hoop per hand became two, a total of four.

Amidst the applause, Ching Ling Foo's eyes flared and he flung the rings into the air – one, two, three, four. Snatching the first one, he used it to snare the others, which snapped into the loop of the first ring one after the other. Then he grabbed the last ring with his other hand, and gently pulled them apart.

No one dared to blink. They could only stare as the middle two rings were slowly stretched out. Now there were no longer just four of them, but eight, dangling in a U-shape before the performer.

But the sequence did not stop. With a shake of his arms, the magician separated all eight rings and sent them flying up into the air. Ching Ling Foo himself jumped up, reaching with his left hand to grab one ring, with which he linked each of the remaining seven before his feet touched ground. Now he clapped his hands together, and eight rings became four. Another clap,

and there were just two. This pair flew into the air, linked as they rose but separate by the time they fell, into his awaiting hands, as they had been at the beginning.

The famous Chinese ring trick!

The crowd applauded wildly, but once again a hoarse, drunken voice intruded: "There are hidden catches on the rings. He didn't let the audience inspect them."

Without waiting for Moser to interpret, the man smilingly extended the rings to a gentleman in the front row, who looked embarrassed, but at the urging of the crowd, carefully ran his hands over every inch of the silver surface, but didn't find a single thing. He held them up to the stage. Ching Ling Foo took them back, held them against each other, and transformed them into a single ring.

There were no suspicions this time. No response but thunderous applause.

"Mr. Ching Ling Foo, the inventor of the Chinese ring trick!" Moser announced.

Ching Ling Foo tossed the single ring into the air and bowed, as flower petals of many colors descended instead. An attendant handed him a flaming torch. He opened his mouth and swallowed the fire. As the audience cried out, his chest swelled, as if the smoke were expanding it. Then he held his breath, and let the seconds tick by. Just as every single person felt their own heart rise in their throat, Ching Ling Foo opened his mouth, and let forth a plume of smoke veined with tongues of fire.

Upon reaching into his mouth, he pulled out a ribbon, first with one hand, then two. His assistants came over to help. How much silk did he have in his belly? Someone yelled, "The mile-long ribbon!"

This was the other trick Ching Ling Foo was renowned for. The ribbon had been measured in front of an American audience, and had indeed been a whole mile long.

The drum sounded again. The six swordsmen rushed center stage and began another skirmish, their movements no longer in unison. It was every man for himself, as their weapons swooshed through the air. Their faces were ferocious behind their rattan shields. A blade sliced a shield in half, and one of the warriors was kicked off the stage.

Was this part of the show, or could their bloodlust have overwhelmed them?

There was a bellow of rage. An accident! A sword had grazed a fighter's neck, and now blood was spurting out as if splashing from a cup, arcing through the air from the stage. The front row had no time to cry out, avert their faces, or even fix their eyes on the red droplets, when somehow the blood turned into flower petals, landing lightly upon the clothes and hats of the ladies and gentlemen.

When Ching Ling Foo left the stage at the intermission, the audience exploded in astonishment.

"Did he really invent the Chinese ring trick?"

"The flying tank of water! Why hasn't he done that yet?"

"Out of the two of them, who is more famous in China?"

"Make him catch a bullet in mid-air!"

As soon as the curtain fell, the house manager came out and smilingly addressed Ching Ling Foo. "Reporters are waiting in the green room to interview you, sir."

Perhaps he hadn't heard or understood, but Ching Ling Foo merely shook out his long sleeves and walked backstage with quick strides, his hands behind his back. He didn't speak the language, so had never bothered conversing with western reporters. That was Moser's job.

There were props and costumes everywhere. Princess Chee Toy had changed into an outfit better suited to a martial arts expert. One of her court attendants brushed and braided her long hair, a gold hairpin in her mouth. Ching Ling Foo reached out to squeeze her narrow shoulders through her jacket with the raised collar, and the princess smiled at him in the mirror. Only Ching Ling Foo could see the anxious expression hidden beneath her make-up.

"It will be fine. We've tracked him all the way to England, we'll have to put in a bit of effort to make him show himself. You don't need to worry."

Turning to Moser, Ching Ling Foo frowned and asked, "When are we going to see this Chung Ling Soo?"

"We've just arrived in London. What's the rush?"

"It has to happen sooner or later."

Ching Ling Soo stepped out of the wings, leaving Moser behind.

The north wind arrived early in the winter of 1904, its ghastly cry sending a tremor through everyone's heart. Passers-by hunched over as they rushed for the cover of buildings. A gentleman tried to steady himself against a streetlight, clamping his hat on his head with one hand.

The back door of the theater opened, and Ching Ling Foo appeared without his coat, in a little black hat like an upended soup bowl. His scrawny frame vanished into a waiting carriage, and the horses' hooves clattered against the cobblestones as they took him from the muddy street into the darkened alleyway opposite.

## **The Living Target**

The same evening, at the nearby Hippodrome Theater was completely full. Even the aisles were crowded with those who couldn't get seats. The marquee before the theater proclaimed in English: "Chung Ling Soo, Marvelous Chinese Conjuror." Then the same words in Chinese on either side.

It was December 26, 1904, the day after Christmas. The audience had sat through a pair of Australian brothers tossing wine bottles to each other, and Russian swordsmen dancing amongst flying bits of paper without letting a single scrap touch the floor. Now it was time for the main event.

Dressed in a Chinese-style robe, Chung Ling Soo faced the Hippodrome audience. As usual, he didn't say a word as he readied the bow and arrow in his hands, tugging at the string and straightening the feathers. He didn't even glance at Suee Seen as she walked onto the stage.

Princess Suee Seen satisfied a different type of male fantasy. Her delicate frame was wrapped in a Chinese robe embroidered with flowers; she wore a patterned cloth over her head, and had tucked a pale red camellia behind her right ear. Hoots and whistles came to her from every corner of the auditorium.



The debate over Suee Seen's height had been raging for a while. Most people were convinced she was no taller than five feet, or even four-foot-eight, but her proportions were so perfect, she was definitely not a dwarf from the Hungarian circus or a midget raised in a Turkish urn. The men of London had never set eyes on Suee Seen off-stage, nor had the university students who called out her name at the stage door, nor the gentlemen who brought her flowers and chocolate. According to the Chinese books, there was a beauty in olden times who could dance in the palm of the Emperor's hand. Suee Seen seemed to have stepped out of just such an ancient tale.

Even women adored Suee Seen. When Chung Ling Soo threatened her with knives, swords, and ropes during the show, they wished they could rush on stage to rescue the tiny Chinese maiden.

Suee Seen bowed slightly to acknowledge the applause, then shuffled across the stage in her embroidered slippers, coming to a halt about two paces before the target, and standing in an opera singer's pose. Behind her was the wooden board with a red circle painted on it. With her right hand, she pulled a handkerchief from her bosom and waved it to show she was in line with the target. Her other hand was planted on her waist.

Chung Ling Soo stood across from her, a thin screen of paper between them. He stood with his feet planted firmly apart, facing the audience, his head turned to the left. He notched the bow, a white string tied to his arrow, then tossed his head back so his queue swirled around his neck, and fell gently behind his shoulder.

The women in the audience screamed as Chung Ling Soo pointed the arrow directly at the target, just the other side of the paper from Suee Seen. Wasn't he certain to hit her?

Three members of the public were invited onto the stage to examine the arrow and paper screen. One of them, a woman in long gloves, took advantage of the moment her body shielded him from view to pinch Chung Ling Soo viciously on his elegant cheek.

The bow and arrow were real, the paper screen was real, and Suee Seen was especially real.

A dull drumbeat sounded from the orchestra pit. The other dozen or so musicians stopped, letting the bare-chested drummer pound away at the large instrument.

Men in the front rows stood up, staring wildly at Suee Seen, who seemed to have no idea she was about to become Chung Ling Soo's target. Some women lowered their heads, while others shielded their eyes with their fans. They could neither watch nor bear to look away.

Many varieties of bow-and-arrow performances had graced the stage, frequently in displays of skill, as with William Tell and the apple. Robin Hood's story was also popular, but that was dramatic. With magic, the slightest moment of inattention could lead to injury, and so conjurers tended not to use bows in their acts.

As soon as it appeared on stage, Chung Ling Soo's act invariably caught the audience's full attention.

The drumbeat accompanied his languorous movements as he raised the bow, then slowly lowered it till it was level with his shoulder.

The blank-faced archer, the string dangling onto the floor, the thin paper rippling in the breeze; the doll-like oriental woman fluttering her handkerchief with her hand on her waist; the quickening drum.

As the entire audience cried out in alarm, Chung Ling Soo's arrow shot directly ahead, through the paper screen, Suee Seen's gown stirring in its wake, landing right in the center of the target.

A few moments later, scattered applause started. More than a thousand eyes stared at the white string, which passed straight through Suee Seen, and was still connected to the quivering arrow in the bull's eye. Suee Seen was still standing upright, her smile unchanged.

Chung Ling Soo strode over to take Suee Seen's hand. He led her to the front of the stage, and grabbed hold of the white string, pulling it taut. An assistant untied it from the arrow, and in an instant, the string flew through the air and through Suee Seen's body, landing in Chung Ling Soo's hand.

There was no blood. Suee Seen remained on her feet, dimpling at the audience.

The rafters shook, and the carriage-drivers outside had to rein in their horses as the animals tried to rear in fright. Chung Ling Soo never disappointed an audience.

Suee Seen spun around in Chung Ling Soo's arms, bowed to the audience, then minced off stage.

Chung Ling Soo took his bow, and retired backstage, still not having displayed any emotion at all. Once again, he had easily conquered the whole audience. Not one other magician could perform "shooting the princess" so flawlessly, not even Herman the Great.